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Eudora Welty : From "The Wanderers" to THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

Juli Ling Miller

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Abstract

EUDORA WELTY:

FROM "THE WANDERERS" TO

THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

by Juli Ling Miller

The writings of Eudora A. Welty have been published since 1936. They include four collections of short stories and five novels. Although she is a highly anthologized southern writer and winner of several literary awards, serious criticism of her works has been limited to her early short stories or the regionalism of her novels.

The scope of this thesis includes a traditional analysis of "The Wanderers," a story in The Golden Apples (1949) collection which has received cursory study, as well as an analysis of her latest published novel, The Optimist's Daughter (1972) which has yet to be studied by critics.

In addition to contributing to the overall examination of Miss Welty's literary works, this thesis suggests that the novel is a derivation of the earlier story.

Both stories revolve around the events surrounding the funeral of the protagonist's parent and the change in philosophy experienced by the surviving daughter during the immediate mourning period highlighted by the funeral--both protagonists are single, middle-aged women. In addition, the social setting is similar in both stories. They are, in fact, quite interchangeable, and the symbols in both stories mirror each other: sight, clocks, and birds. Finally, both relate to the theme of living the "really

good life" which is associated with moving boldly into the future unshackled by the past or by convention.

The basic weakness of "The Wanderers" is its failure to make the change in Virgie Rainey's approach to life a reasonable occurrence: a viable stimulus is missing for the transition from her being a 40-year-old woman living quietly at home with her mother and working as a typist to leaving her hometown to seek a bold and golden life elsewhere.

In The Optimist's Daughter, the daughter Laurel Hand is supplied with a series of experiences which carefully lead her towards a new look at life, thereby rectifying the primary weakness of "The Wanderers." Not only is Laurel Hand's change of attitude realistically presented in the novel, but Miss Welty also puts forth a panacea for coping with contemporary alienation and ennui. Such a forthright statement is unusual for Miss Welty who usually specializes in merely describing very well the contemporary human situation.

It seems that in The Optimist's Daughter has taken the framework of "The Wanderers," strengthened its weakest part, added the colorful and useful characters of Becky and Fay, and made a clear statement on her conviction regarding how to live.

LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

Graduate School

EUDORA WELTY:
FROM "THE WANDERERS" TO
THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

by

Juli Ling Miller

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in the Field of English

June 1975

Each person whose signature appears below certifies
that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in
scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree
Master of Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary critic Robert Daniel wrote that the most challenging problem facing writers from the South in the forties and fifties was "how to avoid rewriting Faulkner."¹ Eudora Alice Welty has met that challenge in a manner which suggests that Yoknapatawpha County is not *that* big, that there are many acres left in the South for other imaginative writers to explore without being in Faulkner's territory.

Her achievements have merited numerous lectureships, grants from the Rockefeller and Merrill foundations and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, two Guggenheim fellowships, and several honorary degrees. (She received her B.A. degree in English literature from the University of Wisconsin in 1929.) She has also received the O'Henry Memorial Prize, the M. Carey Thomas Award, the Brandeis Medal of Achievement, and the Hollins Medal. She has accomplished these literary feats with almost no formal instruction in writing and without ever establishing a "literary life style" for herself. "I would not understand a literary life at all," she told Katherine Porter. "I keep underfoot locally." Miss Welty enjoys tending her garden, playing her piano, and listening to music. Her active role in Jackson, Mississippi affairs leads her friends to marvel that she has any time to write anything, especially a novel.²

Miss Welty's writing career began in 1936 when John Rood accepted "Death of a Traveling Salesman" for his *Manuscript* magazine. From that time her signature was regularly sought by *Harper's Bazaar*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Southern Review*.

Four collections of her short stories have been published: *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943), *The Golden Apples* (1949), and *The Bride of the Innisfallen* (1955). But these short story collections were not enough. As Katherine Porter said in her introduction to *The Curtain of Green*, most short story writers are not left alone to write short stories: publishers confront them with *The Novel*, with the necessity of writing that really big story.

And so Miss Welty wrote some novels. The first one, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) is a hilarious tale of fantasy, complete with golden-haired maidens, wicked step-mothers, bandits, Indians, incredible coincidences, and mixed identities. In an interview with Robert Van Gelder, Miss Welty reflected that such a book was inevitable and irresistible since she had enjoyed so much "a lifetime of fairy tale reading."³

This first novel was followed by *Delta Wedding* (1946) which deals with the emotional and social structure of the Fairchild family as it surfaced at the time of a family wedding. Granville Hicks called the novel "a triumph of sensitivity";⁴ Harry T. Moore, who praised many of her short stories, concluded that Miss Welty was "no master of the novel," her efforts being "inconclusive and vague."⁵ At this time, much more serious study of *Delta Wedding* is needed.

Then she wrote *The Ponder Heart* (1954) which brought her the Howells Medal for Fiction the following year. Sixteen years later *Losing Battles* was published, an extended and intricate work which has not received much critical study either--even less attention than *Delta Wedding*. In 1972 Random House published *The Optimist's Daughter* in book form--it had been printed in *The New Yorker* in a slightly different version in 1969.

Her latest publication is not a novel or a short story. *One Time, One Place* is a collection of 100 black and white photographs, mainly portraits of Blacks, which she took while traveling throughout Mississippi as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration during the Depression. (The photographs were not associated with her job--she merely took them for fun.) At that time she was still considering a career as a painter, and at that juncture in her life she realized her need "to find out about people." She understood then that her "continuing passion" would be "to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight."⁶

Despite the bulk of her publications, it was not uncommon for me to receive a quizzical stare when asking for some work about or by Eudora Welty at libraries or bookstores. "What was that first name?" "Eudora." "Who's he?"

However, in American short story anthologies she is a recurring name. Her stories appear more frequently than those of Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway. She is superseded only by William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Katherine Mansfield.⁷ Popular anthology selections include the varied fare of "Death of a Traveling Salesman,"

"A Memory," "Petrified Man," "Powerhouse," and "The Wide Net"--stories of alienation, loss of innocence, and the mysteriousness of life.

Formal criticism of Miss Welty's stories, not to mention her novels, is very limited. Only two full book-length studies have been published so far: Ruth M. Vande Kieft's volume for the Twayne series on American authors (1962)⁸ and Alfred Appel, Jr.'s *A Season of Dreams* (1965) which focuses on Welty's concept of reality in the short stories.⁹

Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks have both published and provided criticism for her short stories in their book *Understanding Fiction* and in their magazine *Sewanee Review*. Warren has written some additional short essays on Miss Welty's stories. Ray B. West, Jr. includes a short, but careful, evaluation of her writing in *The Art of Modern Fiction*.¹⁰

There are maybe two dozen other good short articles on her works, mainly concerning her first two collections. The criticism has concentrated on definition of themes (human isolation and need for personal identity within a community, loss of innocence, and the "mystery" of the joy and sorrow of living), appreciation of her use of myth and symbol, her accurate handling of speech forms ("Her ear is surer than a mirror . . . twice as true as life."¹¹), and her natural narrative technique. And, of course, there are the expected attempts to analyze her "statement on the South" and to classify her as a regionalist.

John E. Hardy rightly lamented that "the reputation of Eudora Welty is beginning to outrun criticism of her work. We need something comprehensive in the way of a study, something less hasty than the review and

something at once more objective and not so essentially condescending as the *bon voyage* essay."¹²

Indeed, much work remains to be done on the short stories which are filled with a parade of "abnormal" people--murderers, rapists, psychotics, suicides, deaf-mutes, and the senile--in a wide range of circumstances. Some stories have a clear plot; others have almost none. Some stories have strong and changing characters; others concentrate on setting rather than characterization. As Thomas Landess has noted, "There is no typical Eudora Welty story in the sense that there is a typical Ernest Hemingway story."¹³

In contrast to the short stories, Miss Welty has used very ordinary small-town people in very ordinary settings as the center of her novels. A wedding, a court trial, a family reunion celebrating a birthday, and a funeral provide the stages for the extended works.

It is the novel based on a funeral that concerns this small piece of research. When one reads *The Optimist's Daughter*, a feeling of *deja vu* steals across one's mind. Ay, yes, the last story in *The Golden Apples*, "The Wanderers." Both move around the funeral of a well-known person in a small town, and both include hordes of mourners who plague the lonely daughter with their time-honored ways of observing a death. Both daughters are not so much grieved over the loss of their parent as much as they are horrified with the truths about life which they encounter in the few days they remain at the parental home. The truth that the daughters discover even seems the same in hasty recollection. It is not characteristic of Miss Welty to repeat herself in plot. Neither is

it usual for her characters to come to any understanding of themselves and their human plight as is the case in both of these works.

The working hypothesis of this paper is that *The Optimist's Daughter* is a deliberate revision of "The Wanderers," a revision that enhances the artistic wholeness of "The Wanderers" and elevates it from a poor story to a good one.

My methodology will be quite simple. First, I shall study "The Wanderers" as a separate work, giving heed to the story collection it concludes. Second, I shall study *The Optimist's Daughter* as a separate piece of literature and also as it compares to "The Wanderers." The similarities and differences between the two works and the nature and effects of the changes will be analyzed; indications of a studied work of revision by Miss Welty will be reviewed.

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Chapter One

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THE WANDERERS

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor,
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And some one called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

"The Song of the Wandering Aengus"

This poem, written in 1899 by William Butler Yeats, not only gave Eudora Welty the title for her story collection in 1949, but also provided the buttress of a unifying theme and a mythological allusion for that collection. Each of the seven stories, originally published separately over a period of two years, centers on the lives of fifteen "main" families from the town of Morgana, Mississippi. The characters are

recurrent in the large tale which spans 40 years and chronicles the various individual searches for "the golden apples" of life.

"The Wanderers" is more than the random last story in this collection of short stories. It must be the final tale because it is the philosophical conclusion of the unified human saga told by Miss Welty in this collection.

Therefore, in order to accurately evaluate "The Wanderers," I must search its roots in the earlier stories in this collection. I must find out where the characters have come from in terms of human experience before I can understand or evaluate them in the final story. The development of the thematic concerns also need to be traced in order to judge their literary validity. Most important of all, "The Wanderers" makes almost no sense at all as an isolated story: it is vitally linked to the earlier stories. A brief summary of these other stories is imperative before initiating the study of "The Wanderers."

In the first story, "Shower of Gold," the reader meets Mrs. Rainey, the chatty vendor of muscadines, ice cream, milk, and butter in Morgana. The story begins.

That was Miss Snowdie MacLain.

She comes after her butter, won't let me run over with it from just across the road. Her husband walked out of the house one day and left his hat on the banks of the Big Black River.--That could have started something, too.

We might have had a little run on doing that in Morgana, if it had been so willed. What King did, the copy-cats always might do. Well, King MacLain left a new straw hat on the banks of the Big Black and there are people that consider he headed West.

Snowdie grieved for him, but the decent way you'd grieve for the dead, more like, and nobody wanted to think, around her, that he treated her that way. But how long can you humor the humored? Well, always.

But I could almost bring myself to talk about it--
to a passer-by, that will never see her again, or me
either.¹ Sure I can churn and talk. My name's Mrs.
Rainey.

What Mrs. Rainey tells is how King came to Morgana, and how he went, how he married Snowdie, how he continued to come and go at a whim, how he sired twins, and how he finally left his hat on the river bank. It becomes obvious that King is an image of Aengus--he, too, fishes, hunts in the woods, and chases young maidens. The entire story is laden with further mythological allusions which have been carefully studied by William M. Jones in his article, "The Plot as Search."²

The next story, "June Recital," introduces actual lines from the Yeats poem and paints a vibrant portrait of young Virgie Rainey, the central figure in "The Wanderers." Loch and Cassie Morrison, brother and sister, watch from different windows, different aspirations, and different memories the nearly abandoned house next door which used to belong to the MacLains. It is both an intricately told and a highly imaginative story which at one point has young Virgie frolicking with a sailor in an upstairs bedroom while her former piano teacher, Miss Eckhart, prepares to burn the house down in the rooms below. The major movement in the story balances between Cassie's analysis of Virgie and of Miss Eckhart, and Loch's observations on women and on life. Tension is established between the life which boldly pursues the silver and gold apples and the life which is, in comparison, fruitless yet "socially safe." Virgie and Miss Eckhart emerge as variations of the Aengus theme, and Loch and Cassie serve as a jury seeking a verdict.

King MacLain returns again in the third story, "Sir Rabbit."

In the night time,
At the right time,
So I've understood,
'Tis the habit of Sir Rabbit
To dance in the wood--

(p. 97)

The magnetism of his personality and his complete independence from society are underscored again in the account of his seduction of Mattie Will in the Morgana woods. After being taken by King, Mattie views the world in a sweet and mysterious light: King has given her a glimpse of the golden apples to be plucked in life, and she is now one of King's disciples.

The innocent sensibilities of young girls at the summer camp called "Moon Lake" is the study of the fourth story. Morgana girls who have until now felt privileged and secure encounter a group of orphans who have been sent to the same camp. The orphans emerge as people far more exciting and knowledgable than the "normal" girls.

Easter, the most magnetic and prominent orphan, nearly drowns one afternoon, and the lifeguard, Loch Morrison, saves her despite the silly intrusions and admonitions of the ridiculous mothers and counselors. Figures of authority topple in the girls' estimations, and former figures of ridicule, like Loch and the orphans, gain prestige. Nina and Jenny conclude at the end of the story that things may not necessarily go well for them: "You and I will always be old maids."

In the next story, "The Whole World Knows," King's son Ran gives a first-person account of his search of his place in life, his search for some happiness. In this chapter his young wife Jinny Love has gone home to live with her mother, and she is dating the young man Ran works with

at the bank. Welty's emphasis falls on Ran's clumsy efforts to regain general and self-esteem in town where everybody knows everything about everyone else. But even his attempt to find some human warmth through sex in a suddenly cold world is futile. The pathetic story concludes as Ran cries out to his father and to his brother, "What you went and found, was it better than this?"

"No," comes the answer from brother Eugene, the central character in "Music from Spain." He lives in San Francisco and works for a Market Street jeweler. He impulsively slaps his wife one morning, skips work, and spends the rest of the day sharing numerous meaningless adventures with a Spanish guitarist with whom he cannot converse because of the language barrier. It is a tedious day and a tedious story, but it makes the point that life can be without direction whether one lives in Morgana or in supposedly glamorous San Francisco. Eugene reflects upon the morning incident which touched off his bizarre day:

He struck her because she was a fat thing.
Absurd, she had always been fat, at least plump...
plump when he married her. *Always was is no reason
for its being absurd even yet to--* But couldn't it
be his reason for hitting her, and not hers? He
struck her because he wanted another love. *The forties.
Psychology.*

(p. 164)

When Eugene eventually returns to his hometown, he does not discuss his life in San Francisco with anyone.

Silver trout, glimmering girls, and golden apples continue to elude the sons of King, as well as the other characters from Morgana. The collection ends with a story called "The Wanderers," the central concern of this paper. It is the story of Katie's death and funeral. The

story can easily be divided into three sections: (1) the day she dies, (2) the day of the funeral, and (3) the day her daughter Virgie shuts the door of the Rainey house and leaves Morgana.

In the opening scene of this story Mrs. Stark barks at her Negro girl for not having returned earlier from her visit to her sister. Katie Rainey has died and Juba simply must go immediately to the Rainey home to cook and to clean because Mrs. Stark knows "what any old woman owes another old woman." Mrs. Stark "hates all men and is real important"--she is the Emily Post of Morgana society and Ran MacLain's mother-in-law.

Miss Welty does not elaborate on Katie's later years beyond mentioning how she bossed Virgie and then was amazed that Virgie minded. Then Welty moves into the account of Katie's death on a Sunday afternoon. Almost immediately the house is filled with townspeople who bring flowers, food, and stories. After peering at the dressed Katie, everyone goes home, promising to be back early for the funeral the next day.

Left alone at last, Virgie goes for a swim in the river. This becomes a mystical experience, which I shall study further later, and serves as a signal to the reader that Virgie is the story's protagonist. Following her swim, Virgie drives the cows home, milks them, and goes to bed early.

The next day brings out-of-town relatives in addition to the returning neighbors. King MacLain comes, too, entertaining the folks with his story about how he gave Katie her now taken-for-granted swivel chair. He again exhibits his undying independence from "civilized" behavior, and Virgie establishes in her mind a spiritual kinship with him during the funeral service.

After everyone has come by the house one more time for refreshments after the graveside services, Virgie goes to bed early. She is awakened

and frightened by an old lady who brings a night-blooming cereus she wants Virgie to see. Disgusted, Virgie throws it into the weeds outside.

Juba returns the next morning to help Virgie pack up Katie's things. There are many laughs as superstitious Juba carries on and on about the ghosts of former Morgana citizens she has seen in the town streets. This segment of the story offers some comic relief from an otherwise sober-faced stretch of the story.

Virgie finally closes the house, goes for a quick drive by the cemetery to please her friend Cassie, and then drives seven miles to the town of MacLain on her way to somewhere--no specific destination is given. The story ends with Virgie thinking about the timeless search for the golden apples as she sits under a tree during a rainstorm. So ends the book also.

A story grounded on a funeral may not indicate cheerful or even funny moments. Yet such is the case in "The Wanderers" because Miss Welty sketches in some detail the social behavior of a small community; a slight comedy of manners develops.

I have already mentioned Mrs. Stark's peremptory sending of Juba to the Rainey house. That she herself has not ever set foot in the Rainey house and that Juba may not be needed does not matter; a person of her status just does these things.

Going to the home of the deceased before, during, and after the funeral service is also *de rigueur* in Morgana even though common sense would demand some privacy for the bereaved. In *The Ponder Heart* (1954) similar congregations arrive at Uncle Ponder's court trial, as they had at the funeral of his wife Bonnie Dee: "Everybody and his brother was on hand...people not knowing the Ponders but knowing of them are just about everywhere you

look. It was a grand day."⁴ Edna Earle even dares to say: "There's something I think's better to have than love, and if you want me to, I'll tell you what it is--that's company."⁵ A similar philosophy permeates *Delta Wedding* (1946) and *Losing Battles* (1970). In the latter, Pet Hanks cries out, "It's a holiday!" when spreading the news of Julia Mortimer's death. "Isn't it the luckiest thing it's a Sunday she picked? Suppose it had been a school day, like tomorrow. We'd been cooped up."⁶ No matter what the occasion for bringing people in town together, the result is pleasure simply because they are again together.

But the people do not come empty-handed. They either bring flowers or food, preferably both. No fancy florist display or bakery and delicatessen items, please. Only the home-grown and homemade, unless one is a poor bachelor like Mr. Nesbitt. So for three days the women of Morgana cook in Katie's kitchen while the men and children eat what is prepared: chicken, ham, sausage, beans, corn, salads, okra, bread, cakes, pies, pickles, relishes, and gallons of tea and coffee. Wall-to-wall people, food, and flowers--that is the way of Morgana folks.

Their ways include quietly understood protocol which dictated who would lay out the body of the deceased, who would sit up with the body during the night, who would hand out the fans during the funeral, who would be allowed to arrange the chairs and the curtains, and at what points of "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go" one would shed a tear.

Nevertheless, for all this show of a closely knit group of people, little genuine grief over Katie's death or concern for Virgie is exhibited. Going through the motions permits them each to maintain a distance which can never be crossed. "They left the cemetery without looking at anything,

and some parted with the company at the gate." No one will even take a few seconds to right the corucopia of red zinnias that has fallen by the grave-- that isn't part of the script they have rehearsed so many times.

Placed within such a social setting is Virgie, who is surrounded by 21 characters in the story, most making only cameo appearances. They are usually named as a guest and utter a few words or bring some particular gift and disappear. They are familiar names to those who have read the other stories in *The Golden Apples*, and they represent the stock cross-section of small town citizenry. In this final story they have married, had children, lost a mate, moved into and out of Morgana, or simply grown old since their earlier appearances in the book.

Out of this passing parade, only four people will be studied separately, for they are the ones who raise the issues, present the alternatives, and act in a way significant to the themes of the book and "The Wanderers" in particular. The first scrutinized will be Katie Rainey, followed by Ran MacLain, King MacLain, and then Virgie Rainey.

Prior to the account of her death, revelation of Katie's personality comes through her conversation with a passer-by, the reader, in "Shower of Gold." Her commentary of King's wooings, wedding, wanderings and offspring reveals a person very much at home with being a woman and with living in Morgana. She has life pretty much figured out and throws around phrases which suggest a certain wisdom about life, such as: "How long can you humor the humored? Well, always"; Haven't you noticed it prevail in the world in general? Beward of a man with manners"; "We could see the writing on the wall."

She even mentions having an advantage over her dear friend Snowdie because of a special revelation received early in life: "But it didn't

seem to me...that Snowdie had ever got a real good look at life...Maybe she just doesn't know the extent. Not the kind of look I got, and away back when I was twelve year old or so. Like something was put to my eye." So Katie assumes a protective attitude towards Snowdie, especially after Snowdie receives a message from King after he has been gone for three years. "Suppose you meet me in the woods" comes the message. "My foot," cries Katie, "Oh I don't know how poor Snowdie stood it."

Katie, however, is not overly harsh towards King. She pauses in her excited narrative to say; "I see King in the West, out where it's gold and all that. Everybody to their own visioning." She seems to understand that he is made from different stuff than most people.

As for her own life, she is quietly married to Fate Rainey, a man who "ain't got a surprise in him and proud of it." She speaks of marriage as a relationship which gives people the "right to sit inside and talk in light and comfort, or lie down easy on a good goosefeather bed." Ease with everything and everyone--that is what characterizes Katie before she appears again in "The Wanderers." And in this story she does not even bother to mention her daughter, the unabashed hellion of Morgana in her youth.

It is a different Katie that is encountered in "The Wanderers." The description of her life prior to dying emphasizes her watching and her waiting: "The old people in Morgana she reminded of Snowdie MacLain...who watched and waited for her husband so long. They were reminded vaguely of themselves, too, now that they were old enough to see it, still watching and waiting for something they really didn't know any longer, wouldn't recognize to see it coming down the road" (p.205).

The chief concern in Katie's life has become time. She peers down

the road hour after hour, day after day, wondering whether or not Virgie will come home from work in time to do the chores before dark. And when Virgie does come home in time to round up the cows, milk them, and dress the quails for dinner, Katie is amazed: "It's a wonder, though, a blessed wonder to see the child mind." The meaninglessness of her life extends to the silly lies she tells Virgie even though she recognizes them as ridiculous and unconvincing (p.206).

The Katie of "The Wanderers" is barely the same woman who displayed the friendly and active interest in life in "Shower of Gold." As she feels the first thrust of pain, signalling her death, she thinks: "Whereas, there was a simple line down through her own body now, dividing it in half; there should be one in every woman's body--it would need to be the long way, not the cross way--that was too easy--making each of them a side to feel and know, and a side to stop it, to be waited on, finally" (p.207). Somewhere in the intervening years life has lost some of its earlier glimmer for her. Perhaps life did not turn out to be as cut and dried as her glibness suggested in the earlier chapter. Perhaps the years have put some more things to her eye. Maybe even she did not know "the extent" of life. It could be that the truth of one of her early comments on life has come home hard: "Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run, and all the time we heard things from out in the world that we listened to but that still didn't mean we believed them" (p.9).

She has become a woman who only wants to be waited on. She does not want to know anymore. The world is no longer a comfortable place for her; she could feel its "lack of chivalry." She is dead to the world before she dies.

Yet it is not only the old in Morgana, the old in the world, that have lost their way. The next generation is represented by Ran, and he is remembered in his loneliness in Morgana where "the old ways, the eternal politeness of the people you hope not to know," make alienation even more painful and absurd ("The Whole World Knows"). Youth is no barrier against a sense of aloneness.

In "The Wanderers" Ran is reunited with his spoiled and immature wife, Jinny Love Stark, and he is the father of two very mischievous children. (The little girl wears live lizzard earrings to the funeral.) He is also the mayor of Morgana, despite the well-known separation from his wife, despite his adultery, despite the suicide of the young girl involved. Miss Welty suggests that Ran is mayor *because* of this infamy: "They had voted for him for that....They voted for the revelation; it had made their hearts faint, and they would assert it again" (pp.210-211).

Ran represents, perhaps, a surge of livingness, of some vitality, in a town quietly collecting dust and gravestones. The people reach out to grasp the coattails, to shake the hand, to vote in affirmation of daring to live. However, Miss Welty does not make it clear whether or not Ran has indeed tasted of golden fruit yet or if Virgie correctly ascribes to him a passionate will to live life, to suck out its marrow.

There is this same ambiguity when studying King, Ran's father. In this last story King is a crotchety old man who delights in letting others know that he was the one who set Katie up on her swivel chair throne. He spends the rest of his visit gorging himself with rich food, despite Snowdie's admonitions. He even eats right through the funeral service during which he makes "a hideous face at Virgie, like a silent yell. It

was a yell at everything--including death, not leaving it out. . . . Then he cracked the little bone in his teeth" (p.227). Here we have a more familiar King, the man who will not be stopped by any social conventions.

After the service he and Snowdie go home and that is all that is seen of him. It is a rather hollow end for the golden-haired Sir Rabbit of earlier days. Why did he come home to stay and what does he think? Had he been fooled by life? Were the gold and silver fruit images in a mirage? Or has he tasted fully and is now content to enjoy the more pedestrian aspects of life?

Finally, there is Virgie. She is overdressed, in heels that are too high, and her hair is as unruly as ever. We learn that she has also had a brief affair with Mr. Mabry who now brings "hush money" in the form of freshly shot quail each day. This is only one of several affairs she has had in her mature years--they have all been with inferior men. These brief liaisons seem to be the only rebelliousness she has displayed since her running off with the young sailor at age 17.

This acquiescence is a surprise. Earlier descriptions etched her as "a human being terribly at large" in the world and "full of the airs of wildness." She was once notoriously pushy, stubborn, and outrageous. She drank whole bottles of vanilla extract, tried literally to beat her brains out against the school wall, and dared to tell the venerable piano teacher what she would and would not do.

Virgie had had musical talent. Miss Eckhart, the piano teacher, had said so and had tried to get her out into the world with her music. But Virgie only got to the local Bijou where she provided music appropriate to

what came onto the screen. By the time she is seen again in "The Wanderers," her once deft fingers type all day and milk cows in the evening. There is no more music.

It is a disappointment. Virgie Rainey apparently fizzled out with age, and it is easy to understand her mother's amazement at not having a girl who minded and who spent her Sunday afternoons struggling only with a hard-to-match plaid.

But then Katie dies and Virgie is neither afraid nor sad. She thinks about the dress she is making, and she watches the hummingbird outside her mother's bedroom window. In the hour of death, "a torrent of riches seemed to flow over the room, submerging it, loading it with what was oversweet." Hints of silver and gold, of fruit, of burgeoning life. Apparently Miss Welty is not finished with Virgie yet!

After Virgie goes through the ritual of greeting the guests and shedding the tears everyone has waited to see--they do not know that her tears are not for Katie but for the inability of people to tell the stories about her correctly--she finally feels release when the guests leave: "As they went, they seemed to drag some mythical gates and barriers away from her view....The world shimmered" (p.218). It is only in her moments of solitude that Virgie comes alive. Virgie is beginning to catch a glimpse again of Life.

She goes down that evening to the river and here she is "baptized" into a new life. This passage must be cited almost in full in order to appreciate its centrality to the story:

She saw her waist disappear into reflectionless water; it was like walking into sky, some impurity of skies. All was one warmth, air, water, and her own body. All seemed one weight, one matter--until as she put down her head and closed her eyes and the light

slipped under her lids, she felt this matter a translucent one, the river, herself, the sky all vessels which the sun filled. She began to swim in the river, forcing it gently, as she would wish for gentleness to her body. Her breasts around which she felt the water curving were as sensitive at that moment as the tips of wings must feel to birds, or antennae to insects. She felt the sand grains intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas, and the many dark ribbons of grass and mud touch her and leave her, like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear, now dismembering and losing itself. She moved but like a cloud in the skies, aware but only of the nebulous edges of her feelings and the vanishing opacity of her will, the carelessness for the water of the river through which her body had already passed as well as for what was ahead....

In the middle of the river, whose downstream or upstream could not be told by a current, she lay on her stretched arm, not breathing, floating. Virgie had reached the point where in the next moment she might turn into something without feeling it shock her. She hung suspended in the Big Black River as she would know to hang suspended in felicity.

(p. 219)

Virgie has more than regained her youthful sensitivity to and participation in Life. She has now fully plunged in. The river ritual is the death note of a mediocre life and the birth or rebirth of the "pure wish to live," that drive which she clearly associates with King, when he makes that silent yell and cracks that bone, and with his grandchildren who so carelessly and noisily play in the yard during the service. She had felt the spiritual alliance earlier, and this baptism is the confirmation, the elucidation.

After the funeral the next day, she announces her intentions to leave Morgana. She decides the same moment she announces it: the spontaneity of her youth is returning.

Later, in the graveyard, Virgie passes by the grave of the girl who committed suicide because of her futile relationship with Ran during his estrangement from Jinny. "I hate her, Virgie thought calmly, not turning her head" (p. 231). Virgie hates that girl because that girl rejected

Life, that with which she now has made a firm covenant. The girl had sold out, and Virgie has no time anymore for the cowardly or the weary.

Virgie has another intense emotional experience when she is home after the funeral. It carries *deja vu* qualities. She had felt this "opacity" before when she was 17. She had felt then for the first time this impenetrable wall between her and other people. That first time had been when she had returned from Memphis on the train after her brief adventure with the sailor Bucky Moffitt. She had come home "dazzled," not really hurt yet, and she had run with excitement towards whatever faced her next. She had also known that day, without a doubt, "that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying: but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood--unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back" (p. 234). Her understanding of that earlier revelation is much richer this time around--is it because she has suffered as a result of those truths all these years?

After these reflections, she then thinks of the cows she milks, and she sees the milking routine as a hunt for a prison inside the cow "where she could have a real and living wall for beating on." Her personal frustration with life surfaces: for too long she has been trapped by unexplained "walls."

As mentioned before, a woman brings a night-blooming cereus to Virgie. She is uncomfortable with it and dumps it in the weeds. She slowly relaxes again after this disturbing incident as she envisions in her mind the river as it must be at that hour with its mist and moonlight, the moonlight forming a connection "between the self and the moon, to make the self feel

the child, a daughter far, far back" (p.236). The more regular aspects of Nature appeal to her. The rare night-blooming flower is too much at odds with the larger scheme of Nature. Blooming should not be such an unusual occurrence that one must get up in the middle of the night to see it. Golden sunlight, silver moonlight, and a flowing river are more to the taste of a follower of Aengus.

Virgie leaves Morgana by way of MacLain, one of her favorite towns. Her thoughts by the grave of Eugene MacLain are that he had learned that people did not have to know, did not have to be told, what happened. The citizens of Morgana never did know anything about his wife or his life in San Francisco or whether there were children. Virgie likes that independence, that secrecy.

The rain falls and Virgie sits on a town stile. She thinks about the paltry assortment of men in her life as a few of them walk (conveniently) by. Her mind goes back to Miss Eckhart's picture of Perseus and the Medusa and she remembers tearing the picture frame off one day. She reflects further: "Cutting off the Medusa's head was the heroic act, perhaps, that made visible a horror in life, that was at once the horror in love, Virgie thought--the separateness. . . . beyond the beauty and the sword's stroke and the terror lay their existence in time--far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night" (p.243).

Virgie perceives the grand impasse of life--"every hero, as well as every heroic act, implies a victim, a slaying, and hence a source of horror to the onlooker."⁷ Being free, being an Aengus, victimizes others. It could even victimize oneself.

Virgie sits under a tree as the book and story end, and she hears "the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon's crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan" (p.244). With this conclusion Miss Welty has moved Virgie's moments of epiphany into the arena of timelessness, into the mythical search of the wanderers for the golden apples, for a resolution of Life.

Such a mood brings remembrance of the sweet and sheltered Jenny of "At the Landing" who also had a moment when she penetrated the urgency, the problems, and the mystery of living.

Maybe some day she could become bright and shining all at once....But now she was like a house with all its rooms dark from the beginning and someone would have to go slowly from room to room, slowly and darkly, leaving each one lighted behind, before going to the next....She herself did not know what might lie ahead, she had never seen herself. She looked outward with the sense of rightful space and time within her which must be traversed before she could be known at all. And what she would reveal in the end was not herself, but the way of the traveler.⁸

Virgie too is just setting out to learn what lies in the darkness, in the mystery.

Characterization in "The Wanderers" is limited, as is typical of most stories of limited length. Understanding of what King and Ran represent would be shabby were it not for reference to earlier stories. Furthermore, without these earlier stories, there would not be much notion of what Katie and Virgie had once been in order to realize the full weight and proper balance of the events in this particular story.

That Virgie is transformed within the story is clear. The motivation for the change is a little less clear. Yes, of course, there is the ablution in the river which is written with such serious overtones. And from that point in the story her alienation from the people of Morgana and

her spiritual connection with the MacLains is underscored: "She knew the kinship for what it was . . . an indelible thing which may come without friendship or even too early an identity, may come even despisingly . . . intruding in the middle of sorrow" (p.227). Yet there remains a forced quality to the moments of insight Virgie has. The revelations jump out of the narrative like songs out of a second-rate musical--essentially unattached to the action.

A reading of only "The Wanderers" might lead to accepting the river baptism and the momentary spiritual sparks that fly between the MacLains and Virgie as the impetus for her joining the search for the golden apples. However, when knowledge of Virgie as a young girl is available, the surprise is not that she is allied with MacLain, but that she has not continued all these years in the bold way of her young days. Was it her commitment to her mother? If so, then perhaps the death of her mother would be the impetus for a change, and the river scene would merely be supportive symbolism.

I also wonder about the integrity of King and Ran as patterns for Virgie. Ran was a confused young man and he is now a rather boring one. The fact that he has gained notoriety from the suicide of a young woman cannot be much credit for him--it was the girl who took the bold action. King has come home to live with Snowdie, and his belligerence towards society is exhibited merely in his rude gluttony and cantankerousness. Too much in the story depends on very fragile bits of symbolism rather than on convincing behavior and incident within the story.

I have no quarrel on the other hand with Miss Welty's uses of symbolism on a less dramatic scale. For example, Miss Welty marks her

calendar at September's end for the story, and the grass and flowers in the yard are turning brown. In comparison to the domesticated shrubs and flowers in the yards of Morgana, the river and its banks are lush and living. The dichotomy between the unnatural and the natural, between mundane living and Life is thus emphasized.

When Katie dies, having spent her old age concerned with what time it was, the clock "did not strike; it couldn't." Time no longer moves on or means anything for Katie, and Virgie will soon enter the search of all eternity, a timeless one.

The hummingbird at the window of death represents another suspension in time and space. It also is a wanderer, seeking honey to suck in order to live. Its manner of darting so swiftly from flower to flower also suggests an elusiveness and a mysterious joyousness in manner. The hummingbird could be a type of Aengus.⁹ The story, in fact, appeared originally under the title, "The Hummingbirds."

Finally, Miss Welty cannot resist the use of Venus, goddess of spring, of beauty, of love, and the name of the brightest star in the heavens. Virgie spies the star on the morning of the funeral and acutely feels its presence. Venus does well as the female counterpart of Aengus.

But what can be made of this story as a whole? What is Welty saying? First, I think, that there are two camps of people--those who watch and wait like Gogo and Vladimir in "Waiting for Godot," not knowing what for, and those who refuse to sit and wait, choosing to risk everything to wander in search of the golden fruit of Life. The price is high--there is that separateness, that horror, that mystery which may never be resolved.

But the alternative to stay "at home" is a negative option for it not only lacks vitality, it even carries its own form of isolation. Indeed the Morgana grapevine, the Morgana tribal rites and traditions, the Morgana loyalties--all fail to eliminate the walls and gates between its people. Each person still wears a mask and plays his social role, unable to know himself or his neighbor. They do not even know how to face death honestly and effectively, and the funeral charade is pitiful in its lack of understanding and meaning. All people are in a sense wanderers, but the great tragedy strikes when one does not even know what one is looking for.

Miss Welty never discloses exactly what the golden fruit is--maybe it is different for each person. Each time a character in the book is out harvesting some, however, it entails sexual exploitation, which is appropriate to Aengus. But I would guess that Miss Welty does not want to limit the interpretation in such a way.

My resistance to Miss Welty's presentation comes from the complete inability her god-figures have to love anyone or anything but themselves and the rather impersonal world of Nature. Virgie is never touched by her mother's death, and King and his sons do not show any warmth towards their families or each other. They need not be totally crushed by a death or by human affection, but some touchability would go well here. To anyone who has read Miss Welty's works to any extent, that Miss Welty would allow this unlovingness to be acceptable behavior is very strange. I cannot forget the pathos of her first story in which Bowman, the salesman, is "shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that." He dies from a heart attack, never knowing what it is to love and to be loved as a mature person.

In *Losing Battles* Welty uses Gloria's actions and words to emphasize the sacredness of family ties--King would be shamed.

And so she convinced him that there is only one way of depriving the ones you love--taking your presence away from theirs; that no one alive has ever deserved such punishment, although maybe the dead do; and that no one alive can ever in honor forgive that wrong, which outshines shame, and is not to be forgiven until it has been righted.¹⁰

In "No Place for You, My Love" Miss Welty warns those who would dare consider themselves above the normal level of human needs against separating themselves from society even though it may require some other sacrifices: "Surely even the immune from the world . . . need the touch of one another, or all is lost."¹¹ She is talking about normal human touching and caring on a very simple and concrete level. It is unlikely that such an emphasis on the primary importance of human relations would genuinely be abandoned by Miss Welty.

In her brief paragraphs revealing Virgie's thinking, she also touches on the theme of love/hate and hope/despair. But she never does anything but suggest that it is an interesting thing to think about. Most of Miss Welty's stories and novels have one or two very clearly studied themes. That she should merely suggest topics but never act on them is an unusual event in her writing.

As a concluding chapter to the entire book, "The Wanderers" suffices by simply sending Virgie out to carry the torch once borne by King. In terms of action, characterization, and design, this story is dull when compared to some earlier chapters of the book. But it is a way to end.

I tend to think that Miss Welty would have been keenly aware of the shortcoming of this story, a story which could have been a good one.

I am simply not convinced that her claims for King and Ran are authentic. Neither do I find an incident which solidly places Virgie in the realm of sincerity. Too much supposedly happens within her mind without adequate reason or action; there is too much telling in proportion to the showing. I believe that the subsequent two versions of "The Optimist's Daughter" are deliberate attempts to bind up some of the loose ends found in "The Wanderers."

Chapter Two

1. Eudora Welty, The Golden Apples (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1947), p.3. Additional references to this book will consist of page numbers within parenthesis immediately following the citation.
2. William M. Jones, "The Plot as Search," Studies in Short Fiction, 5 (1967), pp.37-43. See also Joseph Allen Bryant, Eudora Welty (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers), No. 66.
3. "The Wanderers" first appeared in the March 1949 issue of Harpers Bazaar under the title "The Hummingbirds."
4. Eudora Welty, The Ponder Heart (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), p.86.
5. The Ponder Heart, p.56.
6. Eudora Welty, Losing Battles (New York: Random House, 1970), p.158.
7. Vande Kieft, p.142.
8. Eudora Welty, Selected Stories of Eudora Welty containing all of A Curtain of Green and Other Stories and The Wide Net and Other Stories (New York: Random House, 1943), pp.205-206.
9. Vande Kieft, p.145.
10. Losing Battles, p.362.
11. Eudora Welty, The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), p.22.

THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

It was twenty years after the 1949 publication of *The Golden Apples* that *The New Yorker* published the first version of "The Optimist's Daughter" (March 1969). Three years later Random House published the story in book form under the same title. The differences between the two versions are minor, centering on details of the funeral and the citizens of Mt. Salus and on the frequency at which Fay spews out insults to Laurel: Fay is much subdued in the book version. I have chosen the book form of the story for my study because it is Miss Welty's latest version, and its departure from the early form are not major.

As in "The Wanderers," the springboard event in *The Optimist's Daughter* (hereafter referred to as *Optimist* for brevity) is a death. Seventy-one-year old Clinton McKelva, the venerable judge of Mount Salus, Mississippi dies after eye surgery in a New Orleans hospital. His only daughter then returns to her hometown for the funeral; she has been residing in Chicago. At the Mount Salus train station she is met by six girlfriends whose show of solicitude is merely an overture to the stream of people who later come to the house to show their respect for Judge McKelva and to mingle with other members of Mount Salus society at the home of the deceased.

The display of the town funeral trappings harks back to the customs of Morgana, though the time setting in *Optimist* is more recent. As word of the death spreads, there is again the great offering of home-baked and

home-grown food and generous vases and pitchers of flowers from yards up and down the street. Neighbors are at the house even before Laurel the daughter arrives, and the whole town comes to a standstill for the funeral hours: "Bank's closed, most of the Square's agreed to close for the hour of services, county office's closed. Courthouse has lowered its flag out front, school's letting out early" (p.69).¹ Dot Daggett, who has been the Judge's secretary for as long as anyone can remember, exclaims immediately after the services: "I saw everybody I know and everybody I used to know. It was old Mount Salus personified."

Just what is Mount Salus like? The women are members of garden clubs and bridge clubs, while the men hunt or fish in their leisure time. Most citizens are church members. The Presbyterians are characterized by their intelligent acceptance of everything life deals them while the Baptists move from one emotional plane to another--a typical stereotype in Welty stories. There is also the perennial cluster of town strays (those with no family of their own) who serve as seamstress, piano tuner, fix-it man or school-teacher in the community. The established families in town have their "girls," Negro servants, and the wives of the prominent men in town set the social pace and social standards for the others. Mount Salus is a lot like Morgana. Everyone knows each other or about each other and everyone understands where he belongs in the local scheme of things.

Therefore it is no surprise to witness the same example of rueful behavior at the McKelva funeral that was witnessed at the Rainey rites. Laurel is deeply dismayed by the sincere but twisted stories and evaluations of her father and by the grotesque turns of conversation which range from, "Irma says the maternity ward in Amarillo would curl your hair," to a crude

description of how Roscoe stuffed up the windows and doors of a house and "turned on all four eyes of the stove and the oven," thus dying without ruining his physique. Miss Adele Courtland offers comfort to Laurel's clear distress with her comment that the people are only, "trying to say for a man that his life is over. Do you know a good way?"

The cast of local citizens in *Optimist* mirrors that in "The Wanderers." Entire pages could be interchanged with little distortion of this aspect of the stories. Even the hillbilly relatives of Katie and Fay resemble each other.

Furthermore, before Laurel leaves Mt. Salus, she comes to understand some of life's axioms which coincide with a few of Virgie's convictions. First, Laurel notices the close juxtaposition between hate and love in life (p.177) and she sees the rivalry which can arise out of loving too much and loving too little (p.152), whether the object be a person or Life. Secondly, Laurel relives the horror she felt as a young girl visiting her grandmother when she watched the mountain pigeons, "sticking their beaks down each other's throats, gagging each other, eating out of each other's claws. . . (p.140). Her adult insight interprets this ghastly behavior as necessary to and characteristic of life. All are victims from time to time, as illustrated in Virgie's tale of Perseus and Medusa--or all have victims. Finally, Laurel also realizes the mystery life will always hold as she contemplates what it means to outlive loved ones: "Outliving is something we do to them. The fantasies of dying could be no stranger than the fantasies of living. Surviving is perhaps the strangest fantasy of them all" (p.163).

Like Virgie, Laurel finally accepts the ironies, the horror, and the mystery of life and marches back into living, eager to meet any challenge Life presents. She has been purged by the experience of death which leaves her wanting to live again as she has not for a long time.

That is almost the extent of the similarities between the two stories. In none of her other writings has such a definite repetition of action and/or thought appeared, so this close correlation should not be taken lightly. The variances in the two stories are primarily related to the characterization and the increased amount of action which comes to support the themes. How convenient to have these two elements which seemed weak in the short story shored up finally! But there are also significant differences.

It is difficult to speak of action and character separately, as Henry James explained when he wrote, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" Therefore I arbitrarily choose to organize the following section of this chapter by characters, explaining the plot as it is appropriate or necessary.

I shall begin with the man who declared himself an optimist when told that he needs immediate surgery for a slipped retina. He silently marks the passage of time after the surgery, as if "in a dream of patience"; he dies quickly and quietly on his second wife's birthday. Any further knowledge of this man is mostly secondhand, either through his daughter's memory or the memory of others since Clinton McKelva does little more than lie in his hospital bed or in his coffin for the duration of the novel.

In their tributes to McKelva, the people of Mount Salus demonstrate a high respect for the judge and warm memories of a generous, humorous, and ebullient man. Their view is only partly true, according to Laurel's memory,

and she is provoked at first. But then she chalks the errors in recollection up to their lack of information: "The mystery in how little we know of other people is no greater than the mystery of how much" (p.81). They knew him as a public figure who led the people; Laurel knew him as a father who was in need of a leader at times.

During the post-operative recovery period, Laurel thinks about the "unnatural reticence" and strange attitude of obedience mixed with an "uncertainty in his bearings" displayed by the Judge. She wonders if he was "paying some unbargained price" for full recovery. Not a word does he say that again asserts his optimism. He just lies there in the bed. Like Katie, Clinton spends his last days waiting, and the suggestion in both cases is that they are each but a vestige of some more glorious if not more active past.

A more fleshed-out man emerges later in the book when Laurel delves into the earlier part of her parents' marriage, but the Judge's primary function in the story becomes that of a link between three women who represent the main factions in the story's central conflict: Becky, his first wife; Fay, his second wife; and Laurel, his only child.

A further function of this character is to be another example of persons who do not know what happened to them in life, a widespread condition as developed by Miss Welty in this story. In the earlier and shorter version of *Optimist* which appeared in *The New Yorker*, this disorientation of the Judge is given further description: "Laurel could see that her father's small, square upper teeth were showing in an uncharacteristic way-- a shortened, soft lip, as if he had been lent the face of a child. He had

the smile of a child who is deliberately waiting in the dark to be found, not knowing yet that the rest of the players have slipped over to the other side."²

When studying the two women this man married, I wonder what type of man the Judge really was since the two women are so different from each other.

Wife Number One. Becky Thurston McKelva made a last remark to her daughter as she sank into death, a death for which no specific cause is ever given: "You could have saved your mother's life. But you stood by and wouldn't intervene. I despair for you." Laurel couldn't help, and she had felt that her father did not even comprehend what was happening to Becky: "He seemed to give the changes his same, kind recognition--to accept them because they had to be only of the time being, even to love them, even to laugh sometimes at their absurdity" (p.145). Clinton did not seem to comprehend the tragedy being played out before him.

But when Laurel recalls the years of illness her mother suffered and the stark impotence her father displayed in this hopeless situation--other than to declare himself as an optimist for the first time--, she perceives that he suffered deeply in his powerlessness and that this suffering was only the prelude to the misery he must have suffered in his second marriage. "He died worn out with both wives--almost as if up to the last he had still had both of them." In his public life Clinton had everything in control; in his private life, the man was rarely the master.

Becky had voiced despair earlier to the husband who stood bewildered by her bed. She had whispered, "Why did I marry a coward?" Then she took his hand in order to help him bear it. Becky, as Laurel realizes only after many years have gone by after her death, had been the strong one in the family, the one who had acted with self-confidence most of the time.

The words of accusation Becky shoots at her family in her anguish are framed in a sympathetic tone by Miss Welty. Here is a woman who had loved life and found herself spending her dying days trying to comfort and encourage a husband and a daughter while attempting to adjust to the inevitability of her own death. "Her cry was not complaint; it was anger at wanting to know and being denied knowledge; it was love's deep anger." In her weakest moment physically, Becky is still the strongest one in the family in terms of vitality.

Becky's basic sense of adventure parallels the same characteristic in Virgie Rainy in her young happy-go-lucky, devel-dare-me days. Becky was a West Virginia girl who went "up home" each summer, taking Laurel with her to the beloved mountains and rivers, six brothers, and mother. Becky loved to wander in the untracked hills and down the riverside; the fierce summer rain and thunderstorms thrilled her. It was an enchanted world, and this was where she felt she really belonged:

The first time Laurel could remember arriving in West Virginia instead of just finding herself there, her mother and she had got down from the train in early morning and stood, after it had gone, by themselves on a steep rock, all of the world that they could see in the mist being their rock and its own iron bell on a post with its rope hanging down. Her mother gave the rope a pull and at its sound, almost at the moment of it, large and close to them appeared a gray boat with two boys at the oars. At their very feet had been the river. The boat came breasting out of the mist, and in they stepped. All new things in life were meant to come like that.

Bird dogs went streaking by the upslanted pasture through the sweet long grass that swept them as high as their noses. While it was still day on top of the mountain, the light still warm on the cheek, the valley was dyed blue under them. While one of the boys was coming up, his white shirt would shine for a long time almost without moving in her sight, like Venus in the sky of Mount Salus, while grandmother, mother, and little girl sat, outlasting the light, waiting for him to climb home.

(p. 139)

In a snapshot album which Laurel finds while exploring her mother's memory-stocked desk, there are pictures Clinton and Becky had taken of each other with handwritten captions beneath the home-printed snapshots: "The most beautiful blouse I ever owned in my life--I made it. Cloth from Mother's own spinning, and dyed a deep, rich, American Beauty color with pokeberries . . . I'll never have anything to wear that to me is as satisfactory as that blouse." Becky had been a resourceful young lady and it made her both "darling and vain."

Becky had also loved words. She memorized enormous portions of literature which she recited as a young teacher riding seven miles to school each day, and she continued to recite as she lay blind in her bed, as if her recitations might enable her to "defend her case in some trial that seemed to be going on against her life."

She had called for spiritual guidance one day, so a minister had been summoned immediately. He tries to read portions of the Psalms to her, but she can recite faster than he could read. So she comforts them both by talking about a white wild strawberry that grows in the mountains "up home": "You could find them by mistake, and you could line your hat with leaves and try to walk off with a hatful: that would be how little you knew about those berries. Once you've let them so much as touch each other, you've already done enough to finish 'em. . . . Nothing you ever ate in your life was anything like as delicate, as fragrant, as those wild white strawberries. You had to know enough to go where they are and stand and eat them on the spot, that's all" (p.149). Becky relished knowing things like that.

When she was 15, she had gone on a raft down an ice-filled river to a railroad station where a train could take her and her father to Baltimore where there was a hospital. He died there of a ruptured appendix and the staff directed Becky to get in touch with somebody she knew in Baltimore. They were astonished when the girl said she didn't know anybody! She somehow managed to bring herself and the coffin back to the mountain home safely. Neither Laurel nor Clinton could have done that.

This early confidence showed itself again when Becky had her first eye operation. She had dressed carefully and put on make-up and perfume as if for a party and "stretched out her hand in exhilaration to the orderly who came to wheel her out, as if after Nate Courtland removed that little cataract in her eye she would wake up and be in West Virginia" (p. 145).

Virgie's control over Miss Eckhart and her disregard for what Morgana thought about her affairs with the young sailor and her other suitors hint of the same spirit of independence Becky possessed.

Like Virgie, Becky also felt and valued a special kinship--but it was not with a "spiritual family." Her alliance was with blood relatives. The little pigeonholes in her desk were stuffed with all the correspondence of a lifetime. She kept track of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, brothers, mother, and husband, when he was out on the court circuit. She was not one who ever forgot from where or from whom she came from. In the dark hours of her own dying, she held fast to the hands of Clinton and Laurel, intuitively knowing that flesh needs to press together when there remains nothing to be said or done. This is the side of Becky which Laurel has known.

The garden club members and bridge players and church ladies saw another angle. They recall a woman who played a good hand of bridge, who ran a spotless and gracious home, who was a very practical and sensible Mount Salus wife and mother. She had a reputation as a good baker and a fruitful gardener--she had the coveted white thumb and green thumb. (Clinton had been trying to prune her outstanding rose bushes when he noticed a strange flashing sensation in his eye.) Becky fit perfectly into Mount Salus.

Fay does not. Knowledge of Becky comes through Laurel's memory as she filters through memoirs of the past. But knowledge of Fay is direct. Miss Welty leaves few questions in the reader's mind about Fay, whom she directs in a continual flurry of scenes which readily reveal someone Becky would have dreaded. Fay has no parallel in "The Wanderers." The only Welty characters she resembles even faintly are the gabby, goober-eating, permanent-waved, and bored women in "Petrified Man," and they are mostly talkers who never do anything. The portrayal of Fay in the *New Yorker* version is even more savage than the revised one for in it she taunts Laurel with many more sarcastic remarks; she throws several tantrums at the hospital; she hurls open insults at the mourners who come to the McKelva home. Fay is the clue that Miss Welty may not be merely rehashing "The Wanderers."

Fay says stupid things. At the doctor's office, she says *she* didn't see anything in the Judge's eyes, implying that therefore nothing could possibly be in the eye. When the doctor turns out the office lights in order to continue his examination, Fay cries out, "It's dark!" (Miss Welty gives Fay a terrible script to read!) The Judge confesses that in addition to the flashes he is having in his eye, he notices a general dimness in his

vision. Fay recommends that they just "leave it to Nature" to take care of, rather than seek medical attention. Anyway, she never could understand why he had to get mixed up in Becky's "brambles." "Why didn't those old roses go on and die?" (The Judge had suspected that a thorn from the rose bushes had slipped into his eye.)

Fay is also selfish. "I don't see why this had to happen to *me*," she says when Dr. Courtland tells Clint immediate surgery is imperative. "I tell you enough is enough!" and "This is my birthday!" she screams as the Judge dies. She even has the gall to lean over the coffin and cry out, "Judge! You cheated on me!" before turning to the funeral guests and asking, "Why was he so bad? Why did he do me so bad?" Fay makes no attempt to be on hand when the neighbors and friends come to the house. "I'm the widow. They can all wait until I get there."

In fact, her selfishness brings on the death of the Judge. Dr. Courtland is almost ready to remove the eye bandages to see how the eye is healing, but Fay, who has been impatient all along, cannot wait. The nurse runs out of the hospital room that fateful night: "Mrs. Martello came panting up to Laurel, heavy on her rubber heels. 'She laid hands on him! She said if he didn't snap out of it, she'd--' The veneer of nurse slipped from Mrs. Martello--she pushed up at Laurel the red, shocked face of a Mississippi country-woman as her voice rose to a clear singsong. 'She taken ahold of him. She was abusing him...she was fixing to pull him out of that bed'"(p.32). Fay had wanted to join the carnival throngs. She was fed up with "sitting up there with him, putting food in his mouth, giving him his straw, letting him use my cigarettes...." In a later discussion with Laurel, Fay glibly explains that she had been trying to *scare* the Judge into living on the night of her

birthday, the night of the Mardi Gras spectacular. "I wanted him to get up out of there and start him paying a little attention to me for a change." Not once in the entire novel does Fay reveal any concern for the Judge--or anybody else.

Fay is a liar, too. Laurel tries to break down the hostile barrier Fay keeps between them by asking Fay about her family. Fay claims she hasn't got a relative in the world left. She even tells the sad story of how her grandfather died in her arms. Well, a very healthy grandfather and a very large family group show up at the funeral.

Fay is mean. Of Dr. Courtland, Clinton's longtime friend, she notices, "He's not so perfect--I saw him spank that nurse." Later, to the tired and grieving doctor, she says, "All I hope is you lay awake tonight and remember how little you were good for!" (Two-thirds of her comments are exclamatory.) She spits at Laurel at the hospital and throws up the suggestion that Becky died crazy. Nothing is safe from Fay.

Fay is vain. She parades in and out of the hospital room with some cheap new earrings and heels, waiting for everyone to compliment her on these carnival ornaments. At the funeral she also makes sure that everyone notices that the coffin was "no bargain" and the gravesite was in the newest section of the cemetery.

Fay is childish as well as childlike. She throws temper tantrums at the hospital and at the house. She sleeps like a child with her hands over her head in little fists and her face buried deep in the bedding. She listens eagerly to other people's phone conversations "like a child." Her small physical appearance reminds one of a once malnourished child, her hair still looks like tow, and she is pale in complexion. Her voice, however, is old--

"as derisive as a jay's," a "thin, mirthless voice." The ladies in the neighborhood observe that Fay did little more than eat, sleep, and prance around.

The multitude of character faults Fay has could tempt one to look at her as an amusing caricature, but this would be too limited a view. In Fay, Miss Welty has invested much of what is centrally wrong with contemporary life. At the same time, she has meted out a measure of sympathy for Fay: Fay cannot see and will never be able to see what she is. It is not entirely her fault that she is the way she is.

Laurel can tolerate almost all of Fay's uncivilized and immature behavior. What she cannot abide is that Fay does not even realize that she was responsible for the Judge's death and that she does not even feel grief because, "Death in its reality passed her right over." Had she tried to indict Fay with the facts of her father's unnecessary death, Laurel knows that Fay would say, "I don't even know what you're talking about," and she would be telling the truth.

Yet it is not a singular tragedy. Fay belongs to a "family," too. It is represented by the Dalzells, as well as the Chisoms, her blood kin. Mr. Dalzell shares the hospital room with the Judge. He is senile. He thinks he is out "catchin' possum" or setting up a campfire under the stars, and he thinks Clinton is his long lost son, Archie Lee. Mr. Dalzell dies in his confusion. His family, to whom Fay runs for comfort during the Judge's crisis, camps quite comfortably in the hospital waiting room. Clothes are strewn here and there; shoeboxes and sacks of food also sit here and there. The wife lounges with her bedroom slippers on and keeps up a perpetual chatter with her offspring and with Fay. Each tries to tell a story more woeful

or incredible than the next one.

And as if their vying and trouble-swapping were the order of the day, or the order of the night, in the waiting room, they were all as unaware of the passing of the minutes as the man on the couch, whose dangling hand now let the bottle drop and slide like an empty slipper across the floor into Laurel's path. She walked on, giving them the wide berth of their desolation (p.38).

Theirs is a special kinship which Laurel is just beginning to notice in the world. There were certain giveaway signs: "Fay had brought scenes to the hospital...as Mr. Dalzell's family had brought their boxes of chicken legs" (p.131). When Fay's own family, the Chisoms, burst upon the funeral scene, Laurel senses that they have met before as they carry on in their loud, back-slapping, guffawing way, making themselves right at home. Ay, yes, "They might have come out of that night in the hospital waiting room--out of all times of trouble, past or future--the great interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them" (p.84).

Wendell Chisom is Fay's juvenile nephew who further demonstrates the human condition of confusion. He arrives clad in his cowboy suit, brandishing his play pistols. He cannot figure out who he is supposed to cry for or exactly what part of the activities constitute the funeral. He boldly offers to shoot the "bad man" Fay mentions; he innocently picks bunches of Becky's prized Silver Bells; he leaves standing in the back of a pickup, shooting at the people who remained at the house. "No noise came but his own thin, wistful voice. 'Pow! Pow! Pow!'"

Wendell and Fay and Mr. Dalzell represent a type of individual which comes from families that move at large in this world without ever really seeing it, without understanding their relation to it--without caring that they don't understand what is going on. Miss Welty helps establish the link

further when even Laurel grasps where Fay came from in a moment when Wendell launches unaccountably into a bawling session: "Laurel wanted at that moment to reach out for him, put her arms around him--to guard him. He was like a young, undriven, unvindictive Fay" (p.76).

Fay later accuses Laurel of lacking an ability to fight anybody or anything, implying that Laurel lacks sheer guts. Laurel is not defeated. She knows that it is Fay who shoots play pistols: "Fay was without any powers of passion or imagination in herself and had no way to see it or reach it in the other person. Other people, inside their lives might as well be invisible to her. To find them she could only strike out those little fists at random or spit from her little mouth. She could no more fight a feeling person than she could love him" (p.178). Wendell will be as powerless as Fay, despite their shared tendency for making public scenes, unless he learns how to be in touch with the human heart within himself and within others.

Miss Welty furnishes for the reader and for Laurel intimations for a solution to this cold, shallow, undirected life. Time and memory of times past are renounced by Fay. It is through a respect for time and shared memory that a person achieves a level of being above that represented by Fay. Throughout the novel Fay flaunts her total disrespect for, first of all, clock time. She disregards appointments and lets everyone at the McKelva home know that she hates the large old family clock on the mantle. Neither does Fay care for Time as a receptacle for collective remembrances, as a glue which holds people together in vital community. Fay brashly declares, "The past isn't a thing to me. I belong to the future." This disregard for the past leads her to shun and spurn the people and the customs that are part of Clinton's, Becky's, and Laurel's past. The sterility of such an attitude

is highlighted in Fay's insistence that Clinton be buried in the "new part" of Mount Salus Cemetery, rather than in the McKelva plot where Becky was buried and where there are fragrant green blades of grass and beautiful old-fashioned camellia blossoms in a quiet setting. The new section of the cemetery looks like a newly plowed clay field, the flowers are "indestructible plastic Christmas poinsettias," and the grass is portable, odorless, and pistachio green. To top it off, the traffic of the new interstate highway vibrates the earth as well as the air of this new division. The "future" is relatively lifeless in comparison to the past.

Future without ties to the past is also lonely. Even Fay admits this fact when she encounters the longtime friends of the McKelvas. "Well, it's evermore unfair. I haven't got anybody to count on but me, myself, and I. I haven't got one soul" (p.54). Had Fay opened herself up to that which belonged to the McKelva past, there would have been no need for her to be so alone in the hour of death or after that. The people who loved the Judge would have enfolded in their community one whom he loved, if they had been given the chance.

The novel ends without Fay making any changes in her attitudes or actions, and there is little hope given that she will ever change. She stands alone in a house empty of memory, of warmth, of friends, of meaning. Laurel, on the other hand, emerges as a person who grows through the experiences of the few days at her family home. Laurel's mind crystallizes Miss Welty's themes relating to life, memory, and love. In knowing Laurel's story, Fay's becomes even more pathetic.

In the development of Laurel as prime protagonist, Miss Welty does not use any magical dips in cool water or sudden insights into life at the crack

of a chicken bone. In addition, the ideas which Laurel wrestles with are generally more down-to-earth in application than Perseus and the Medusa or Aengus and the golden apples.

As individual people, Laurel and Virgie have similarities. Virgie is recognized as a highly gifted person; Laurel's friends recognize that she can do anything if it's made hard enough for her. Virgie exercised a similar preference for the difficult which, ironically, is demonstrated by her wrestling over a piece of plaid fabric. Both women are single at the time of their stories and both are middle-aged when they capture their new glimpses of Life. These similar facts are all we know of them for background material and, I think, the striking similarity gives further strength to the argument that the two works are related in terms of the author's original framework.

The crucial variance lies in what Laurel does after the funeral before she returns to her Chicago residence and the attendant thoughts that shape the crux of the novel and enable Welty to include and go beyond the themes of "The Wanderers."

Prior to this particular section of the novel, understanding of Laurel is gained only by watching her as she watches her convalescing father in his hospital room. She is quiet and attentive to her father's needs, in sharp contrast to the loquacious and thoughtless behavior of Fay. Laurel steadily reads *Nicholas Nickleby* to the ever silent Judge, hoping the old favorite "would reach his memory," perhaps stir him into his once vaunted optimism. His unnatural reticence and his seeming absorption with the passing of time by the seconds rubs off: she begins to become similarly concerned in a vigil for Time. She begins to gear herself "to the time things take." By the time the funeral has come and gone, Laurel is established as a moderately

sensitive, courteous, and somewhat lonely figure. She does not reach out to other people, as Fay latched herself to the Dalzells, and she has not yet restored her connection with the people of Mount Salus who still think of her in terms of Clint and Becky's little girl.

Remembering and thinking about remembering characterize most of this important post-funeral activity which is really the core of the novel. I will divide into "memory posts" the episodes of remembering as a simple way of organizing a study of it.

Memory Post One, an introductory one, is staged in the McKelva backyard the sunny Saturday morning after the funeral. Four elderly women gather to reflect on the funeral and to offer companionship and a smattering of advice to Laurel, who is tending to the neglected flowers in her mother's garden. The discussion of the four women analyzes Fay's behavior during her marriage to the Judge and after his death. She is clearly an anathema to these women though they do make a feeble effort to understand her background. They also chide themselves for the poor behavior they displayed at the funeral. Attention then returns to Laurel and they beg her to stay in Mount Salus rather than return to Chicago where she will not be able to smell her mother's lovely roses. In other words, they fear she will forever lose touch with Mount Salus. "Once you leave after this, you'll always come back as a visitor ...people don't really want visitors," warns Mrs. Pease.

The ladies then review the many rose bushes and vines in the yard, especially the one everyone knew as Becky's Climber, an old, old rose with deep roots whose name had been forgotten but whose blossoms and fragrance crowned the entire garden in the years it chose to bloom. The discussion of the Climber's unique qualities together with the groups' indulgence in

remembrances initiate Laurel's first recorded thoughts about memory: "Memory returned like spring. In some cases, it was the old wood that did the blooming" (p.115). Away from the business and concrete of Chicago, Laurel is becoming interested in the role and the ways of memory in life as she digs her fingers into the backyard soil.

Memory Post Two has Laurel in her father's library on Saturday afternoon. She dusts the familiar shelves of books, and she remembers the voices of her parents reading aloud to each other by the fire in the evenings. It did not matter what they read. They enjoyed hearing each other's voices and later remembering that they had read something in particular together. On her father's huge desk Laurel finds a silver-framed picture of her and Philip running down the church steps in Mount Salus after the wedding. "Her marriage had been of magical ease, of ease--of brevity and conclusion and all belonging to Chicago and not here."

She also finds on the desk top hardened drops of vermillion nail polish--Fay's mark in the library. Nothing here spoke of Becky, as all her father's files, books, wall hangings, and furniture had spoken of him. Laurel realizes that he had never kept any of the letters mother had written to him, and she guesses that the picture of Becky in her garden he once had on his desk was removed when the nail polish came. Laurel scrupulously removes the polish and waxes the desk so that no trace of Fay remains in the room either. Here Laurel is fighting memory unless she can choose it.

Sunday dinner at Tish Bullock's with the girls who had been her bridesmaids is the setting for *Memory Post Three*. The after-dinner talk begins with a colorful review of the big social events that the Judge and Laurel's friends chose to make of Laurel's wedding despite the war situation at that

time. Conversation drifts to the marriages of the Judge himself and anecdotes about Becky. Remarks about Fay are restricted to "knowing" glances and giggles. The girls conclude that the Judge turned out to be "pretty worldly" in his selection of wives. This infuriates Laurel and she jumps to defend her father's reputation and to reprimand the girls for laughing at him. Tish grabs her and laughs into her face, "Aren't we grieving" We're grieving with you." Laurel retreats. She is not yet entirely warm to even well-intentioned memory, memory meant to rouse the living to life.

That evening Laurel returns to her home to find a chimney swift loose inside. She runs from room to room, closing the doors against the bird, and shuts herself in the master bedroom. She wonders how long the bird has been free in the house, going from room to room, and she is afraid of an unknown danger in the house. She still coils at anything or anyone who would freely trespass her family's past.

Memory Post Four finally breaks Laurel's resistance to a free memory. Her experience in her parents' suite makes her vulnerable to the whole past, thereby unlocking the emotional cuffs with which she has bound herself.

Frustration has been smoldering within Laurel since the night of her father's death. She wants somebody to know that her father would have recovered had Fay left him in peace. She wants Fay's guilt understood by somebody besides herself; she wants release from the terrible secret she carries. On this night Laurel realizes that she wants more than anything else to tell her mother about Fay. But the horror of such an action suddenly confronts her. To tell this awful thing to Becky, even in an attitude of tenderness, endeavoring to find solace for herself, would be even more devastating than all the things Fay had done. It would only torture Becky more. Becky would be the price paid for Laurel's revenge.

From these thoughts Laurel diverts her attention to the small sewing room off the master bedroom. It used to be the nursery. The warm fires her young father used to light here and the long hours Becky or Verna, the town seamstress, used to work the sewing machine while Laurel played with fabric scraps on the floor are pleasant memories of simpler times. The contents of Becky's well-filled cherry secretary keep Laurel engrossed late into the night. There are many recipes, photos, letters, school lecture notes (in case Becky ever taught again), and household records.

One could not think about Becky without thinking about her mountain home. Laurel remembers the first time she was conscious of going to her mother's home, and she recalls the panic that struck her when she saw grandmother's pigeons (as quoted earlier), "sticking their beaks down each other's throats, eating out of each other's craws, swallowing down all over again what had been swallowed before....They convinced her that they could not escape each other and could not themselves be escaped from" (p.140).

"Up home" was where Becky had wanted to be when she was dying. Memory travels the path of Becky's illness and the gnawing pains of helplessness Becky faced, Clinton faced, and Laurel faced in death's coming. Each had found it impossible to *do* or *say* anything which eased the impending horror. "What burdens we lay on the dying, Laurel thought...seeking to prove some little thing that we can keep to comfort us when they can no longer feel--something as incapable of being kept as of being proved: the lastingness of memory, vigilance against harm, self-reliance, good hope, trust in one another" (p.146).

Yet, as terrifying as their mutual and separate helplessness and lack of understanding had been, Laurel, in this night of unchecked memoirs, yearns

to have it all again because "that torment was something they had known together, through each other. She wanted them with her to share her grief as she had been the sharer of theirs." To live, no matter what the cost, is infinitely, it seemed, better than death.

Fay slips back into Laurel's consciousness. She recalls a time when Fay had referred to Becky as her "rival." In the framework of this night's memories, Laurel perceives Fay's statement in new light. Yes, rivalry there was, but "not between the living and the dead, between the old wife and the new; it's between too much love and too little" (p.152). Becky had loved life, memory, and people too much; Fay, not at all. Had Fay loved Clinton, Laurel could have forgiven much, but Fay seemed devoid of love on any level.

In the original *New Yorker* version of this story, this particular episode would end here. But Miss Welty decided to add something else--a husband for Laurel. Philip Hand is non-existent in the initial story; Laurel is a single career girl who has hints of a romance in Chicago. Anyhow, at this point of the book version, Laurel begins to weep deeply. She weeps "for love and for the dead...with all that was adamant yielding." Memory of and grief for love and what happened to it totally flood Laurel. She feels the spring of life begin to flow within her again after a long and weary drought.

Miss Welty's addition of a tragically terminated marriage to Laurel's past increases Laurel's capacity to appreciate the fullness as well as the mystery and misery life can mean for a human being. Virgie, on the other hand, has never had any mature loving relationship or any great disappointment in adulthood when she appears in "The Wanderers," and Laurel in *The New Yorker* story is a woman fully committed to her career in Chicago and exhibit-

ing no warm emotional ties to anyone past or present besides her parents. That the later version of Laurel is a rounder character contributes some credibility to her sensitivities and thoughts in the later part of the book.

"If Phil could have lived" echoes in her curious mind. What would have happened? In her imagination Phil cries out for life: "I wanted it! I wanted it!" His death could have been avoided perhaps. He had refused to take any part in the war that was not a truly active assignment. Architects were usually assigned desk jobs at home. He refused. So he was sent to sea where a *kamikaze* came a little too close. Laurel has what Phil wanted: to live. Her careless use of this gift embarrasses her.

Further recollections of Philip build *Memory Post Five*. Laurel relives the moment when the two of them approached Mount Salus just before the wedding. They had taken the sleeper train from Chicago. I shall quote at some length here in order to let the strength and simplicity of Miss Welty's writing show itself.

When they were climbing the long approach to a bridge after leaving Cairo, rising slowly higher until they rode above the tops of bare trees, she looked down and saw the pale light widening and the river bottoms opening out, and then the water appearing, reflecting the low, early sun. There were two rivers. Here was where they came together. This was the confluence of the waters, the Ohio and the Mississippi.

They were looking down from a great elevation and all they saw was at the point of coming together, the bare trees marching in from the horizon, the rivers moving into one, and as he touched her arm she looked up with him and saw the long, ragged, pencil-faint line of birds within the crystal of the zenith, flying in a V of their own, following the same course down. All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world.

And they themselves were a part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the

very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it, right up front. It's our turn! she'd thought exultantly. And we're going to live forever.

(pp.159-160)

In "The Wanderers" Virgie also recalled an exuberant return home on a train, a time she too was certain the world was hers. In both stories, a return to one's past has given rise to optimism and a sense of complete renewal.

After recalling the train ride home, Laurel further remembers Phil's fiery and watery grave aboard a minesweeper in the Pacific. For the first time she can linger on it realizing that nothing ever really dies if memory is allowed to roam.

Furthermore, sometimes *not* dying is worse. Her marriage had been very brief and without any flaws. She and Phil had complimented each other's strengths and weaknesses perfectly. It was difficult to outlive someone like that, and it was not easy to avoid sometimes thinking of the marriage as a mere dream that had once skirted reality. "The fantasies of dying could be no stranger than the fantasies of living. Surviving is perhaps the strangest fantasy of them all." Laurel was trying to learn not only how to survive her father, but also how to survive a mother and how to survive a husband.

The following morning, Laurel's last in Mount Salus, she burns all her mother's letters and papers and notes, wanting no trace of her mother to remain for Fay's desecration. In the short story version, Laurel by now has scrubbed and packed everything in the house (rather than leaving it for Missouri to do). This burning is her last chore. When that is completed, "the house itself, in that moment, seemed to have died" (NY 127). One cannot elude Welty's association of memory with life or livingness.

Laurel has wavered between attitudes of receptivity and rejection in her movement from one memory post to another. Which will be her ultimate choice remains unresolved this particular morning. A final confrontation with Fay is the catalytic event which forces Laurel to a definite choice just moments before she goes to meet the train to Chicago.

Fay has been home with her family for a few days. She went home on the pretext that she needed to straighten things out with her brother Dewitt who refused to come to the funeral because she had never sent him an engraved wedding invitation. When Fay steps into the kitchen, Laurel is rummaging through the old wooden kitchen cupboard. Battle begins immediately. Laurel demands to know what Fay has done with Becky's breadboard which is now blackened, gouged, splintered, and dirty. Fay, in her usual simplicity and innocence cannot see what could be so sacred about a breadboard.

Phil, who loved to work with his hands, had made it as a gift for Becky. Laurel tries to get through to Fay by evoking the sacredness of the past: "I watched him make it. He's the one in the family that could make things. We were a family of comparatively helpless people--that's what so bound us, bound us together. My mother blessed him when she saw this. She said it was sound and beautiful and exactly fitted her long-felt needs, and she welcomed it into her kitchen" (p.176). Fay is unmoved. She cannot understand what Phil or his breadboard has to do with anything because, "He's dead, isn't he?"

Quickly Laurel reviews all she has remembered and felt and finally understood in the last few days. Something to put before Fay as an argument fails to materialize even though that very morning Laurel had felt strong and wise, in control of whatever the future would bring. As Laurel flounders for some

way to attach Fay's refusal or inability to realize what she had done to Laurel's family, Laurel finally accepts the fact that Fay is an ever-present part of life. She should have known this long ago and learned to live with it: "Past and future might have changed places, in some convulsion of the mind, but that could do nothing to impugn the truth of the heart. Fay could have walked in early as well as late...she was coming" (p.174).

That Fay might already have adulterated her father's memory occurs to Laurel as Fay continues to declare her non-allegiance to anything that has to do with the past. Slowly into Laurel's mind enters the thought that she need not worry about protecting her father's memory or about teaching Fay to honor the past. It is all beyond help or hurt. The past is forever asleep. Any memory will arise again and again like a somnabulist. "It will never be impervious. The memory can be hurt time and again--but in that may lie its final mercy. As long as it's vulnerable to the living moment it lives for us" (p.179).

In her moment of absolute futility, Laurel had taken hold of the bread-board and aims to strike Fay with it. Fay sneers at the melodramatic move and continues her verbal renunciation of the past and of Laurel. Laurel finally puts the board down, but it is not the signal of defeat Fay interprets.

In letting Fay be, Laurel finally ends the personal ambivalence of the last few days and gains a spiritual victory within herself. In letting Fay be, Laurel wholly relinquishes her authority over memory, an act which makes her heart and mind vulnerable again to joy, to sorrow, to dreams--to the experience of life. Only in abandoning her guardianship of the past can Laurel fully take part in the present and hope in the future.

With this conviction--to hold the past as precious but not sacred--Laurel joins Tish in the ride to the train station. Laurel has just barely escaped the predicament of going through life never knowing what was happening.

As a character, Laurel's own personality is not developed much. Her primary role is to provide a set of eyes with which to review portions of the lives of Becky, Clinton, Fay, and Mount Salus, and a mind from which conclusions about the past can form. Had Miss Welty stayed with her initial *New Yorker* story, there would have been even less of Laurel to know since there would be no married life to allude to, no romantic grave for Laurel to pull herself out of.

A review of the characters in *Optimist* shows, as would be expected, a larger cast than the one in "The Wanderers." Knowledge of the one who dies is fuller, and there is the addition of memories of two other people who have died earlier, Becky and Philip. Most of the action consists of remembering about these people and their relation to the living. Fay is an explosive development beyond "The Wanderers." She gives Laurel something or someone tangible to go to battle against, and out of the struggle Laurel comes to grips with the proper place of the past, of memory, of love and hate.

The characterizations of Fay and Becky are the fullest revelations in the book. They represent two opposite approaches to life, and Laurel must choose the way she will follow. These character portrayals are themselves quite lean, including very little that is not necessary to their role in the story. Yet they are both presented through opposing methods: Fay through action; Becky through reminiscences.

Philip and Clinton are nominal characters. They are not essential to the novel. They enrich the framework of "past" but do not make much of a difference in the choices or decisions within the novel.

Optimist cannot boast of any outstanding complex characters: the memorable people are unchanging; the people in flux exhibit few dimensions. It is a situation commonly found in Welty's novels, but rare in her short stories, that the leading sensitive characters are so colorless (e.g. Ellen in *Delta Wedding*, Gloria in *Losing Battles*).

The seeds of the themes of this work are carefully planted symbolically early in the story. Miss Welty scatters references to memories slipping and a concern with clock time and time for Clinton's eye to heal; Dr. Courtland holds "the weight of his watch in his hand"; a seagull with set wings hangs in the sky "like a stopped clock on a wall." The clock on the mantle at the house needs rewinding. Fay hates that clock and intends to throw it out.

Concern with clock time blossoms into a study of the past and its relation to the present, as well as the future as the novel progresses. When the story is completed and Miss Welty's themes are clear, the use of these time symbols must be appreciated for their careful cultivation.

Birds, another familiar Welty symbol, are used in the story to emphasize some basic "facts" about life. Laurel has been afraid of birds since her grandmother's pigeons had frightened her as they participated in sometimes ugly and sometimes violent struggles to live and to grow. The unpredictable chimney swift also terrifies Laurel and she begs others to remove it from the house for her. Nobody else will or can do it, so on the final morning of her stay in Mount Salus, Laurel must free the

bird herself. What Laurel feared most was not the presence of the bird itself but its absolute freedom to enter any memory-filled room unless she deliberately put up the barrier of a closed door. She does not want that small creature to visit the past unless she approves, a situation parallel to her fear of other people visiting her past without her careful censorship. From this authoritarian position, only she can free herself--and she does.

Symbol works closely with the plot. Both Clinton and Becky suffer eye ailments. They cannot see and they die not seeing. Fay and Laurel have trouble seeing the truth about how to live. Laurel gains sight; Fay continues to stumble in darkness and ignorance. Katie had spoken of her understanding of life as an experience in which "something was put to my eye." The use of physical defect to illustrate defects of spirit or mind is a technique used earlier by Welty. "Traveling Salesman," "The Key," "Petrified Man," and "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" draw on the same symbolic technique.

The major theme of the novel identifies the normal human state of helplessness, of not knowing what is happening or what has happened, and, as exemplified by Fay, of not really caring. The prescribed solution is memory--a free and live and shared one. The author is trying to convince the reader that only with a glimpse of the past is understanding discovered.

The old friends and neighbors of Mount Salus are blessed with a sense of some personal identity, escaping the great lonely crowd of modern life, of hospital waiting rooms, because they have made memories

together and they unashamedly remember together the good as well as the bad. Such kinship enables them to survive. Becky and Clinton and Laurel pressed together in the hour of death, aware of their separate weaknesses and of some mutual strength. One must have roots and must suck from them strength and meaning for the future or one becomes as powerless as Fay. Even with roots there come moments when things do not and will not ever make sense and when there will be untold grief. Death is still an unwelcomed guest and love has strange paths. But this is part of the mystery of life that one must eternally respect.

The maintenance of ritual in community life which is observed in both stories achieves a new meaning in *Optimist* when Welty has pleaded her case. Consciousness of time-honored ritual and of the past is necessary to a future vested with meaning. It is a reference point, a north star, for life, and it can revitalize one again and again for living. The ability of memory to eliminate unbearable alienation in life is the major theme of the novel.

As Laurel journeys from memory post to memory post, she learns how it is impossible to know what memory will bring up when it rears its head--memory has no priorities, no standards, no goals, and no judgments to pass. Slowly and painfully, Laurel learns to stop trying to harness memory within her reins and to let it run free. Only when she has come to terms with the past can she take advantage of the present and future.

Laurel is looking for a sense of kinship as Virgie was. Virgie found the MacLains. Laurel discovers, instead, an alliance with the past which will probably take her a lot farther in coping with life than following King would have. Miss Welty has switched from recommending

separation from society to recommending an even deeper penetration into society's heart. The result is a novel which offers much more than the short story in terms of relevance to ordinary human situations.

Optimist's plot provides the stimulus for thought which was missing in Virgie's story. Laurel's discoveries do not suddenly pop into her head. They grow out of what she is doing, what she is seeing, what she is remembering. And these are all reasonable activities in the novel. Believability is maintained. Only after completing the entire novel does one realize the significance of simple occurrences within the story. The story is outwardly so simple. The threads have been woven together ever so carefully, and the subject matter is worth the time, an attribute lacking in much current literature. It is a warm treatment of a profound human problem.

This thematic concern with helpless people is common in Welty stories. She portrays many people who do not understand what their true situation is. Ellie and Albert Morgan, the deaf-mutes in "The Key," go to Niagara Falls in search of that missing element in their marriage after being married for a long time: "Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will even fall in love, the way other people have done." Clytie ("Clytie") drowns herself in a bucket of water because she cannot understand her life in a house filled with crazy people or the life outside of the house. Howard ("Flowers for Marjorie") kills his pregnant wife because he cannot understand how she can be so fertile--she is quite pregnant--while he is unemployed and totally unproductive. Jason and Sara freeze together in the cold as well as in their state of noncommunication. They cannot figure out how to battle the cold of nature within and without in "The

Whistle." They chop up all their furniture one night in an effort to build a fire so they can know warmth once more. The fire is beautiful, but it soon dies, and they are very cold again. The women at the beauty parlor in "Petrified Man" think their problem is in not reading the right magazines or knowing the right people as they continue to live futile lives. Mr. Marblehall believes he will gain happiness by fooling everybody in town with his secret bigamy. He turns out to be the giant fool because nobody else cares about anything he does or is. On and on the list could go of people who fail to see what their true situation is though they understand that something is amiss. It is a theme Miss Welty has never abandoned since she wrote "Traveling Salesman," but never before has she so openly suggested a solution to these problems.

Chapter Three

1. Eudora Welty, The Optimist's Daughter (New York: Random House, 1972). Page references in the chapter will refer to this edition of the novel unless otherwise marked.

2. Eudora Welty, "The Optimist's Daughter," New Yorker, 45:37-46 (March 15, 1969). Page references preceded by the initials "NY" will refer to this earlier version of the story.

CONCLUSION

Can a legitimate connection be established between "The Wanderers" and *Optimist*? I think yes. First, there is the similarity in plot and setting: the death of a parent leads to the philosophical emancipation of their only daughter. The crucial question in both cases is how can a person really live life the way it should be lived. The answer in both cases entails overcoming personal fears and striking out boldly into the future.

In both cases the small hometown and its customs bother the protagonist, but there is variation in the way Miss Welty goes from here. In the short story, two hometown figures supposedly represent the "right way" to Virgie--Ran and King MacLain, whose method is to renounce the past and the people of Morgana. In *Optimist* a basically serendipitous acceptance of the past is the prescribed formula for happy wandering.

Third, the minor themes which Miss Welty tosses up in both works consider the relationship between living and dying, loving and hating, and being victor or victim. Unfortunately, in both works these ideas are merely thrown in, it seems, for a bit of seasoning or color--they are rarely given more than a passing mention. They seem to be ideas which persist in Welty's mind but have not yet found appropriate expression.

Fourth, the protagonists in both works have similarities already reviewed, and they both realize their predicaments and take the first step to get out of their separate sloughs of despondancy. Both are poorly

characterized; there is no sense of all this aliveness the works talk about in either character. It is all reserved for "the future" they embark upon. Other characters in the works are far easier to recall after reading the stories. The advantage that the presentation of Laurel has over Virgie's is that Laurel is tested within the scope of the book in her confrontation with Fay over the kitchen breadboard. Virgie's convictions are ideas that have not met an enemy.

Fifth, the use of seeing and watching and of birds and clocks as thematic symbols in both works indicates a similar artistic history.

The most evident weakness in "The Wanderers," too little action to give the conclusions or the characters credibility, becomes the strong point of *Optimist*. Perhaps the room the novel gives an author for such developments is part of the reason it was redone as a short novel. The disappointment in the novel is mainly that the protagonist's characterization does not match the sparkle and pathos of Becky's and Fay's.

That both works have so much in common and that the main difference lies in an improvement of the earlier story's weaknesses makes an artistic relationship between the two a reasonable suggestion. Miss Welty must have sensed the too mythical and too ambiguous nature of "The Wanderers" in trying to sell her point. It is a poor story and not at all representative of her talents. The "revision" is a generally acceptable short novel which reads quickly and sensibly. Like Miss Welty's much longer, broader, and deeper *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*, its main interest is a woman's view of the past, of family, and of the mysteries of living. Unlike the other two novels, it is not totally immersed in southern histories. Ellen and Beulah seem to be the proper literary predecessors to Laurel. Some

study could be done on the evolution of theme and character and myth in the three novels. Welty's interest in the past and the family could also lead to profitable comparisons with Katherine Porter's and Carson McCuller's portrayals of them. Though they are each a writer from the South, each has gone beyond regionalism in the treatment of such themes, and each has several variations on the themes.

Miss Welty has in *Optimist* made another part in that curtain, the "veil of indifference" which she long ago vowed to pull down. The current human alienation she has succinctly treated in *Optimist*.

What Miss Welty has done is a clear example of an artist who knows what needs to be done to a piece of art and proceeds to do it, eventually. If only she would look at *Optimist* again, as she did once before, and now either exclude the suggestions of other themes or amplify them, and if she would give Laurel some more color. . . . Perhaps she will: she has before.

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